

ABERDEEN ROYAL INFIRMARY.

CORRESPONDENCE

RELATIVE TO THE

Introduction of Homœopathy

INTO THE HOSPITAL.

Royal Infirmary, Aberdeen,

26th October, 1868.

Monthly Committee.

Inter Alia,—

*“ The Committee having heard read
“ the Correspondence between Drs. Harvey, Smith, and
“ Reith, relative to the introduction of the System of
“ Homœopathy into the Aberdeen Infirmary—Resolved,
“ to request the opinion of the Consulting Physicians to
“ the Institution—Dr. Kilgour and Dr. Dyce—on the
“ said Correspondence, and the whole subject therein
“ condescended upon so far as concerns this Hospital;
“ and that, thereafter, the Correspondence, with the Re-
“ port of Drs. Kilgour and Dyce, be submitted to a
“ Special Meeting of the Managers to be held on an
“ early day.”*

“ The Clerk was instructed accordingly.”

*To the Committee of Management
of the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary.*

ABERDEEN, 19th October, 1868.

GENTLEMEN,

We beg respectfully to place in your hands a correspondence that has recently taken place between ourselves and our colleague, Dr. Reith, relative to the introduction into the Infirmary, by him, of the practice of Homœopathy, and the use of drugs avowedly homœopathic.

In entering on this correspondence, and all through it, we have had no personal end to serve. Our relations with Dr. Reith have hitherto been of the most amicable kind; and we have no desire that they should be other than amicable in the future.

But, as Physicians of this Hospital, it seemed to us a duty we owed to the Managers and the public, and to our Medical School and the profession generally, to make known to you the circumstance above referred to.

And now leaving the matter in your hands,

We remain,

GENTLEMEN,

Your obedient Servants,

(Signed) ALEX. HARVEY.
 J. W. F. SMITH.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2019 with funding from
Wellcome Library

<https://archive.org/details/b30568535>

CORRESPONDENCE.

ROYAL INFIRMARY, ABERDEEN,
6th October, 1868.

I.

DEAR DR. REITH,

As your colleagues in charge of the medical patients in this Hospital, we are constrained to address you in reference to the modes of treatment which have been employed by you for some time back in the cases under your care.

It is with great reluctance that we do so, as we know that you are imbued with great zeal for science, and that you have a thorough love for your profession ; but we consider that it is a duty we owe to the public, and to the Managers of this Institution on the one hand, and to the interests of the Aberdeen Medical School, to ourselves, and also to our Colleagues on the other, to protest against your use here of acknowledged homœopathic medicines and preparations.

Further, with regard generally to the doses of medicines prescribed by medical men, great licence is no doubt given and taken in these days. But you have been in the habit of giving the officinal preparations in doses so very much less than those indicated in the British Pharmacopœia of 1867, a work compiled by the most eminent authorities on Therapeutics and Materia Medica in Great Britain, that we must remonstrate with you on this point also.

With your theory of the action of medicines we cannot agree. We think your deductions wrong, and as your views on the Therapeutical action of medicines are opposed to the teachings of men who hold the foremost rank in our profession, we ask you to re-consider those views, for the sake of your own professional status, as well as of the delicate position in which you place us.

We remain,

Yours very truly,

(Signed) ALEX. HARVEY.
J. W. F. SMITH.

Dr. ARCHIBALD REITH, Physician, Royal Infirmary.

II.

39, UNION PLACE, 6th October, 1868.

DEAR SIRs,

I have carefully considered your letter of this date. It will greatly facilitate my reply if you will kindly state on what grounds you object to Homœopathic Medicines and small doses of officinal preparations.

I am,

Dear Sirs,

Yours faithfully,

(Signed) ARCHD. REITH.

Drs. HARVEY and SMITH.

III.

ROYAL INFIRMARY, ABERDEEN,
9th October, 1868.

DEAR Dr. REITH,

It was only yesterday afternoon that we received your note of 6th inst.

We are surprised to see that in it you ask us to state our objections "to Homœopathic Medicines and small doses of officinal preparations," as if we were singular in our disapproval of them !

We have already referred you to the British Pharmacopœia of 1867 and its authors. And you cannot but be aware of the judgment which our profession has pronounced on the negative and inert system of Homœopathy. The pretensions of Homœopathy to be considered either a rational, or a sound system of treatment, have been so often and so ably refuted, that we decline to re-open the discussion, as you seem to wish us to do.

Our object in the letter we addressed to you was this : you have for some time been prescribing systematically to your patients in this Institution doses of officinal preparations which we regard as virtually homœopathic. Still further, you have more recently introduced into the Infirmary a stock of drugs avowedly homœopathic, and these you have been giving day by day.

We were bound to hope (however faint the hope might be), that on a friendly remonstrance from us, you might be induced as far as the Infirmary is concerned, to forego the practice of Homœopathy. In this event there would be an end of the matter. But if not, then and in that case, we felt that it would be incumbent on us, as your more immediate colleagues, to bring the matter under the notice of the Managers, as the proper guardians of the Institution. And this we shall do in the event supposed. If the Managers shall sanction your

proceedings, well and good. We at least, as Physicians of this Hospital, shall have acquitted ourselves of our official responsibility to the Managers, the public, and the profession.

Declining then all controversy, we have only to say further, that on receipt of your reply we shall, if need be, hand it along with this, and our former letter, and your note of yesterday, to the Committee of Management. And any remarks which your reply may induce us to make, we shall submit to the Committee.

We remain,

Yours truly,
(Signed) ALEX. HARVEY.
J. W. F. SMITH.

Dr. ARCHIBALD REITH, Physician, Royal Infirmary.

IV.

ABERDEEN, 13th October, 1868.

DEAR SIRs,

I received yours of the 9th inst., but have not had time to acknowledge it sooner.

You do me great injustice by supposing that I wished to lead you into a controversy on Homœopathy. Nothing was further from my intention ; but, presuming that you must have had very cogent reasons for the protest contained in your first letter—reasons which were not stated—I determined not to take undue advantage of you, but to give you an opportunity of rectifying the supposed omission. You decline, however, to give me further satisfaction ; and the conclusion I am reluctantly forced to is, that you are unable to assign any reason for the responsible position which you have assumed.

Your whole protest then, is based on the allegation that my Therapeutic views are opposed to those of “ eminent authorities,” and must of necessity be so erroneous as to call forth a remonstrance from you as the guardians of pure doctrine in the Infirmary. On this ground simply and solely you object to the use of Homœopathic Medicines, and small doses of officinal preparations, and to my Therapeutic opinions generally.

Before I commit myself however, to these “ eminent authorities,” whose opinions you appear slavishly to follow rather than your own independent judgment, I would require to know which of them deserves most reliance. Having made myself acquainted with the writings of the “ foremost ” men of the profession, I am quite at a loss which of them to call my master. You do not need to be informed, I trust, that our Rabbis differ most notoriously from each other regarding the simplest as well as the most important medical questions, and you cannot expect that I should submit in such circumstances, to be kept

in leading-strings to any one of them. When they all come to an unanimous agreement I shall have no difficulty in yielding to them my hearty assent. I am glad to think that there is one point on which no difference of opinion is found among them. It is when they express the universal feeling of the profession that Therapeutics are in a most disgraceful state, and that medical men know little or nothing of the chief objects of their calling—the relief of suffering and the prolongation of human life. Agreeing as the leading men do, on this point, we must, like dutiful followers, endorse their opinion. But on other questions, some of them involving life or death, you know how wide is the divergence between opposing views. You are aware of the ever-varying state of medical opinions, their uncertainty and instability, and how from the earliest times fashions and theories of treatment, more or less ephemeral, have been as plentiful as the sand on the sea shore. The question, “What is truth?” is as unanswered as ever. In these circumstances, it has ever been one of the axioms of the profession that each practitioner so far from being bound by any Confession of Faith or Articles of Belief—neither of which can by any possibility be framed in our present state of ignorance—I say, each practitioner is at liberty to adopt any treatment he thinks proper, on his own responsibility, and according to the best of his judgment, his brethren having no right to interfere, unless his proceedings be dishonest or criminal. On this principle I have always endeavoured to practice my profession. I have sought to cure or relieve my patients by employing the best means in my power. I am not, and never shall be committed to one particular method of treatment more than another; I reserve the right of judging each case by itself, and dealing with it as I consider it requires, with no other object than a safe and speedy cure; but having been led, after losing faith, like all others, in medicine, to investigate Homœopathy, I have for upwards of two years carefully examined the claims of that system, and put it most anxiously to very extensive practical trial; and I must state my honest and conscientious conviction—cost what it will—that, in a large proportion of cases, this treatment is far superior to any other. I use Homœopathic preparations, because I find that, in many instances, they will save life and cure disease when other means fail. Who will venture to say that I am wrong? Yet after giving me credit for great zeal for science and a thorough love of my profession, and thus tacitly admitting that I am fully qualified to form at least a fair judgment upon medical questions,—for all which I thank you—you have, notwithstanding, taken it upon you to call me in question for adopting what my experience teaches me to be the surest means of curing a large proportion of diseases. You have thus assumed the position which declares that patients ought to be allowed to die or remain uncured under a regular system, than be cured in a so-called

irregular way ; and you must be prepared to face the consequences of your act.

I will not enter upon either an exposition or a defence of Homœopathy ; but there are one or two points in your letters to which I must allude. You say that Homœopathy is “negative and inert,” and that you are not singular in your disapproval of it, the Profession having pronounced judgment against it. You will observe, however, that the Profession has also pronounced judgment against the present system of Therapeutics, declaring it to be not only negative and inert for the cure of disease, but also positively injurious to the patients. Homœopathy, then, cannot be worse than the old system, and certainly can never do harm.

Again, I claim my right to use non-official preparations, even although the medicines can be obtained only from a Homœopathic chemist, and bear the opprobrious name. Their quality and strength is no secret ; some are stronger, some weaker than the corresponding official preparations, and are prepared according to definite principles ;—which is more than can be said of those secret nostrums and potent quack medicines so often prescribed systematically by medical men.

I take leave, besides, to give a plain denial to your unwarrantable statement that Homœopathy has been “often and ably refuted.” The subject has not been so easily disposed of as you imagine. The very fact that eminent men have taken the trouble to write voluminously against it, proves that they considered it too formidable an adversary to be lightly disregarded. The statements of Galileo were “often and ably refuted” by those who would not look through the telescope ; the discovery of Harvey was “often and ably refuted” by those who would not experiment for themselves ; Vaccination was “often and ably refuted” not many years ago, by the very wisest men of the time ; and in this way, but in no other, has Homœopathy been “often and ably refuted.” So far from what its adversaries have written against it being able refutations, they are, to candid readers, only miserable exhibitions of what prejudiced minds will do when they meddle with a subject they are totally ignorant of. They will write clever nonsense about the errors found in Homœopathic works, but they will not look into the root of the matter, nor make a single practical experiment. One of the standard opponents, however, makes the confession—and I pray you to mark it well.—that *he found Homœopathy so successful as far as he tried it, that he has adopted it in his own practice.* You do not know, perhaps, that some of those who undertook to write against Homœopathy, in the course of their investigations became convinced of its truth, and were thus turned from opposition to strenuous advocacy. So much for the able refutation ! As you seem to lay great stress upon “eminent authorities,”

you will perhaps readily receive the information that such eminent Allopaths as Liston, Broussais, Fletcher, Combe, Brera, M'Naughton, have all spoken of Homœopathy in terms of respect, and advocated not merely toleration but a fair hearing to its adherents, and an impartial examination of its claims at the bedside. It is reserved for lesser minds to act on the Inquisitorial principle.

With regard to your remonstrance on the subject of small doses of officinal preparations, supporting it as you do by the Pharmacopœia of 1867, with its "eminent authorities," may I ask you to read once more the preface to that work. There you will find the following passage which you appear to have forgotten: "They (the doses) are not authoritatively enjoined by the Council, and the practitioner must rely on his own judgment and act on his own responsibility in graduating the doses of any Therapeutic agents which he may wish to administer to his patients." After this distinct statement on the part of the "authors" of the Pharmacopœia, I consider your objection, to say the least, uncalled for. I do not understand what you mean by a Homœopathic dose; and from the fact of your using the expression in such a connection, I infer that you have a very indefinite idea of it yourselves.

Your agreement or non-agreement with my Therapeutic views is a very small matter indeed—scarcely worth notice. I may retort by expressing similar sentiments towards your views and modes of practice. I claim my right to differ from you as you do from me, and as you differ from each other and from your brethren on many points. I have already alluded to the miserable state of Therapeutics, and to the recognised principle that each physician may adopt whatever opinion he pleases; but I deeply regret, for your own sakes, and that of the Aberdeen Medical School, that you as Clinical Teachers—one of you Professor of Materia Medica—should have shown such apparent non-acquaintance with the literature of your profession, as to say that my views of the action of drugs recently published are in opposition to the teachings of the foremost men of the day. Had you studied the writings of such men as Fletcher, Brown-Seguard, and Handfield Jones in this country, and of Claude Bernard, Trousseau, &c., on the Continent, you would have found that the conclusions to which I have arrived are more or less anticipated. These men recognize the double action of medicines and the difference between remedial and toxic doses, and other avowedly Homœopathic doctrines. Your argument, therefore, falls to the ground. The very "eminent authorities" to whom you appeal in support of your protest, are proved to be arranged against you. It would have been well had you considered this before venturing to raise objections to my views. And allow me to say, that it was by following out the teachings of the men just enumerated that I was brought face to face with Homœopathy, and not from studying the writings of Hahnemann or his followers.

It is now eight months since my first paper was published in the *Edinburgh Medical Journal*, and since then two others have appeared. So far from being opposed as you would have it, to the teachings of the leading men, they have been approved of in many quarters, and several Allopathic Physicians of eminence, as I am informed, have expressed their satisfaction with the views propounded. Had there been anything amiss with my papers, the *Edinburgh Journal* would have certainly refused their insertion; but as this is not the case, it is not becoming in you to interfere.

You ask me to reconsider my views for the sake of my own professional status, and for the purpose of relieving you from the delicate position in which you say I place you. If my professional status can be maintained only at the expense of truth, I can afford to let it go. But you must remember that the position you now occupy is entirely self-assumed, and that I acquit myself of every responsibility in connection therewith. The consequences, which you will doubtless regret, must lie on your own heads. Your so-called delicate position arises from the circumstance that you have not had the moral courage to say No to that spirit of intolerance which has been the bane of the Medical Profession from the earliest era of its history.

Before you send this correspondence to the Managers of the Infirmary, I must ask you in honour to answer candidly the following questions :—

1. Have you carefully studied the subject of Homœopathy, so as to be well acquainted with its principle and mode of application ?

2. After such careful study, have you put the system to a lengthened, impartial, systematic, practical trial, so as to be able to form an opinion on its merits ?

In common fairness I trust you will not hesitate to give me satisfaction on these points.

I am, Dear Sirs,

Yours faithfully,

(Signed) ARCHD. REITH.

Drs. HARVEY and SMITH.

V.

ROYAL INFIRMARY, ABERDEEN,
17th October, 1868.

DEAR SIR,

Agreeably to the course indicated in our letter of 9th inst., and adhering to our purpose of avoiding all controversy with you, we shall now hand this whole correspondence to the Committee of Management.

You ask us, indeed, before doing so to answer two questions.

This would serve no end that we can see, unless to furnish you with another opportunity of giving vent to an equally long diatribe on the subject of Homœopathy.

Besides, the general tone of your letter is such, that we should hold ourselves excused from complying with the request, were we otherwise disposed to do so.

Offensive to ourselves personally, it is a reckless attack on the profession at large,—a body which, for reasons best known to yourself, you strive to blacken and discredit.

Moreover, to answer your questions would be foreign to the object we have in view,—which is not to discuss Homœopathy with you, but, simply, to acquaint the Managers of the Infirmary with the fact, that since your appointment as one of the Physicians of the Institution, you have introduced into it the practice of that system.

We now leave the matter in the hands of the Committee of Management, and any reply you may see fit to make to this letter, you will please address to the Committee.

We remain,

Dear Sir,

Yours truly,

(Signed) ALEX. HARVEY.
 ,, J. W. F. SMITH.

Dr. ARCHIBALD REITH, Physician, Royal Infirmary.

To the Committee of Management

of the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary.

GENTLEMEN,

My colleagues have intimated to me their intention of laying before you a correspondence which has just taken place between us relative to the treatment of disease recently adopted by me in the Infirmary. In their last letter, dated 17th October, they state that they decline to receive further communications from me, and request me to address to you any reply which I may see fit to make.

My colleagues profess to have had but one object in view in opening the correspondence,—namely, to apprise me of their intention to acquaint the Managers of the Infirmary that I have introduced Homœopathy into that Institution. Had they adhered to this plan originally, there would probably have been an end of the matter. But their first letter to me took the form of a threefold protest—against Homœopathy, against small doses of the authorised preparations, and against my published Therapeutic opinions generally. In their second letter, dated 9th October, they not only repeat this protest, but they abuse Homœopathy, and decline to adduce any reasons for the part they assumed, except that, as they allege, my opinions and practice were opposed to those of eminent authorities in the profession.

My reply was simply this—1. That those very authorities to whom they appealed were all divided among themselves, and could not, therefore, over-ride personal judgment. 2. That, whatever treatment Homœopathy has received from members of the profession, many eminent physicians have spoken of it in terms of respect, and advocated its toleration. 3. That the authors of the Pharmacopœia have distinctly declared the doses of officinal preparations to be an open question, and entirely dependent on the opinions and judg-

ment of each practitioner. 4. That my published views of the action of drugs were fully in accordance with those of the foremost men in the profession.

My colleagues seem to have ignored all this; and they very uncharitably allege, in their letter of the 17th inst., that my reply is "a reckless attack on the profession at large," and that I have striven to "blacken and discredit" it. This is a serious accusation. It is sufficient vindication to state that, in self-defence, I only reiterated the opinion of those very authorities on whom they lean, that the present system of Therapeutics is in a deplorable condition, a shame and reproach to the profession. If this opinion be a reckless attack—if it blacken and discredit the profession—then the odium of promulgating it rests on the eminent authorities and not on me.

My colleagues also decline, for trivial reasons, to give me satisfaction on the two questions I propounded to them. Medical men are only too glad to lay hold on anything which may blacken and discredit Homœopathy; and had my colleagues been able to answer my questions in the affirmative, it would have given them much pleasure to do so. There can be no doubt, therefore, that they have never studied Homœopathy, nor put it to a practical trial. In these circumstances they condemn me unheard, and presume to disapprove of principles and practices which, confessedly, they are in complete ignorance of

My colleagues consider my reply offensive to themselves personally. They do not seem, however, to have reflected that by attacking me in so unprovoked a manner as they did, they raised a question of very vital and personal moment to me, involving, as it does, my position and prospects in this city, if not more. Backed as they are by the bulk of the profession, and their consequent influence, I feel that I have to wage an unequal contest, almost single-handed, with only the justice of my cause to support me. If I have spoken plainly, it is not more than the circumstances demanded; and I only regret that the offence has been given to those with whom I have hitherto been on the most friendly terms. Had

they invited me to a personal and friendly conference before writing their protest, this correspondence, with its inevitable consequences, would, in all likelihood, never have taken place, and offence would not have been given or taken on either side. The mere name of Homœopathy has frightened them; and, without waiting to enquire what it was, and wherein it consisted—how much or how little of it I believed and practised—they have rashly ventured into a position which, I am sure, they will ever afterwards regret. I feel their behaviour in this matter most deeply—all the more when I reflect on the relationship previously subsisting between us.

Should my colleagues make any further remarks on the the subject before you, I trust that you will give me an opportunity of replying thereto. I leave the matter with confidence in your hands, being assured that you will deal with it in the most impartial manner and so as to promote the best interests of the Infirmary.

I have the honour to be,

GENTLEMEN,

Your most obedient Servant,

ARCHD. REITH.

ABERDEEN, 30th October, 1868.

REPORT BY DR. DYCE AND DR. KILGOUR.

ABERDEEN, 3rd November, 1868.

Mr. CARNIE, Clerk, Royal Infirmary.

DEAR SIR,

In reference to your letter to us of the 26th ult., and accompanying documents, we would beg to report, that whilst there can be no objection made to any Medical man following any mode of treatment he may choose to adopt with his private patients, or such as may come voluntarily under his charge, yet, as Homœopathy is not accepted as sound and rational treatment by the Medical Profession, nor by the Public, it is certain that an Hospital in which such is practised would not possess the confidence of the one party or the other. Those for whom its benefits are intended would not likely be recommended to it by Medical men or others; and within its walls there could be no harmonious co-operation, or such a thing as a joint-consultation on cases however obscure or dangerous.

It is for the Managers, therefore, more than for us, to consider how far such a state of matters would impair the usefulness of the Institution, and along with that the contributions of the public to its funds, or what influence Homœopathy might have on the Medical School of Aberdeen, of which the Infirmary is so very important a part.

We are,

SIR,

Your obedient Servants,

(Signed)

RO. DYCE.

„

AL. KILGOUR.

Extracted from the Minute and Letter Books of the Royal Infirmary by WILLIAM CARNIE, Clerk to the Managers—4th November, 1868.